

Optimizing Conditions of Teachers' Professional Practice to Support Students with Special Educational Needs

by Bernie Froese-Germain and Bob McGahey

In his article *Making Canadian Schools inclusive: A Call to Action*, Gordon Porter refers to the question of how to provide services to students with special needs as a “flash point issue for education systems in Canada”¹. While this description may be somewhat overstated, certainly education systems, schools and teachers struggle daily to meet the varied needs of students. Teachers are called to adapt their lessons to meet the learning needs of all of their students – a task that becomes more complex for students with identified exceptionalities.

Across the country, teachers are working to provide individualized instruction to the students in their classes. Teachers use their professional judgement to modify teaching to suit the learning needs of students. Occasionally, this modification is required as a result of students being formally identified as having a learning exceptionality. As classrooms become more diverse, the teacher's task becomes more difficult.

A recent article in the Ontario College of Teachers' magazine, *Professionally Speaking*, calls for a change to the pre-service training in Ontario. This change would involve all teachers studying the content currently in part one of a

three-part certification in special education. The call is the result of a consultation conducted by the College prior to revising the Special Education Additional Qualification course. According to the College's Manager of Standards of Practice and Education Déirdre Smith, OCT.

“Parents made it clear that they want teachers to have a depth and breadth of expertise related to all exceptionalities. It is essential to parents that the principles underlying differentiated instruction and universal design permeate the professional practices of all teachers.”²

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The challenges associated with teachers adapting to meet individual student needs can be made more difficult given the trend toward standardization in education. It is counterintuitive to be focussing on individualized instruction while at the same time hoping for standardized outputs on a standardized assessment. In a recent article on inclusive education, researchers Kathleen Hulgin and Bob Drake conclude:

The aim of inclusive education – democratic membership and rich learning opportunities for all students – is at risk in the current policy context. Though the [No

Child Left Behind] Act is framed as advancing the needs of students with disabilities, it may be planting discrimination deeper and more unconscious. As educators fear losing jobs, rely on standardized curriculum, emphasise basic skills and pull increasing numbers of students out of the regular classroom for intervention, the goals and practices of inclusive education seem increasingly unreasonable.³

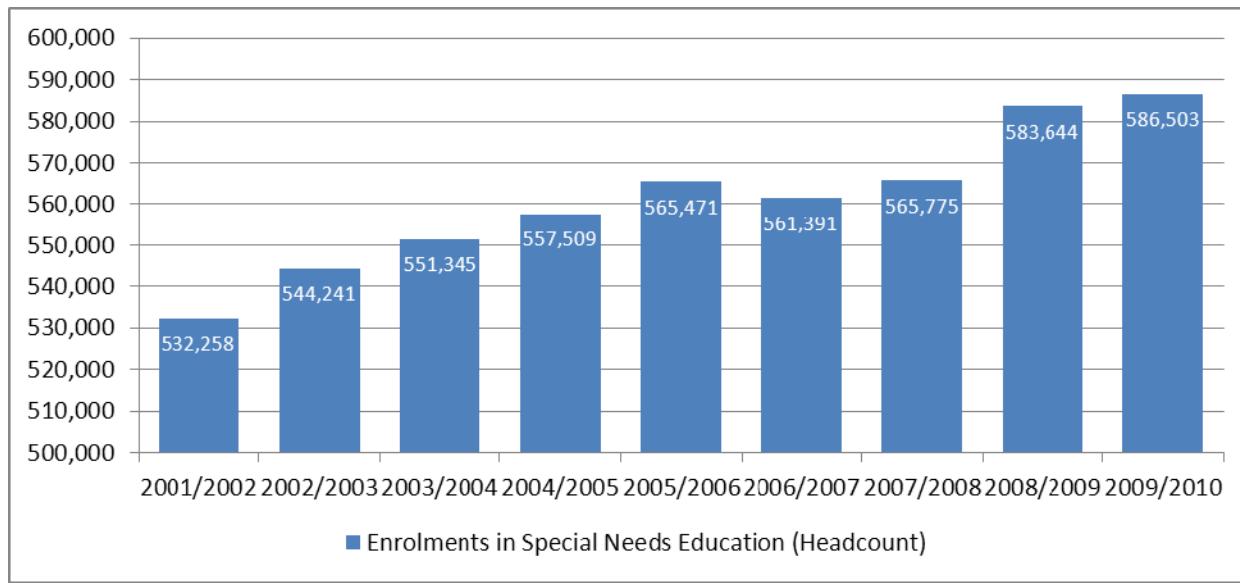
Similarly, one of the themes that emerged from a 2009 study of the Alberta teaching profession's views on the future of special education was "the incompatibility between the province's avowed support for inclusive education, on the one hand, and its dogged pursuit of a standards-based approach to accountability, on the other." Among the recommendations from the report is that "Alberta Education, in consultation with teachers, redesign the accountability policies and practices related to students with special needs."⁴

While it may be argued that Canadian teachers do not face the same level of fear as their American counterparts, certainly the pressure to succeed on standardized testing is ever-present. As a result, Canadian teachers are subject to similar pressures in terms of ensuring that their classes perform up to standards.

Beyond the challenges created by the current political ideology, there are other issues impacting on special education. For example, recent research by People for Education found that in 2009-2010 most of Ontario's school boards (67 of 72) spent more on special education than they received from the province – in total, school boards spent \$174 million more on special education than the province provided. Regarding students with special needs who have been identified but are not receiving the recommended support, while there have been improvements since 2005-2006, 23% of elementary schools and 21% of secondary schools report having identified students who are not receiving support.⁵

Inequities related to waiting lists and access to programs and services are another concern.

Chart 1: Student Enrolments in Special Needs Education, Canada 2001–2010



People for Education reports that “the average number of children on special education waiting lists in high poverty schools (10) is more than double the average number of children (4) per low poverty school. And 28% of high poverty schools report they have identified students who are not receiving recommended support, again, double the percentage of low poverty schools.”⁶

Another significant challenge revolves around sheer numbers – teachers appear to be facing a greater number of students with identified exceptionalities in their classrooms. Data from Statistics Canada show that, nationally, since 2001 there has been a 10.2% increase in the number of special needs students in elementary and secondary schools, representing over 50,000 students⁷ [Chart 1].

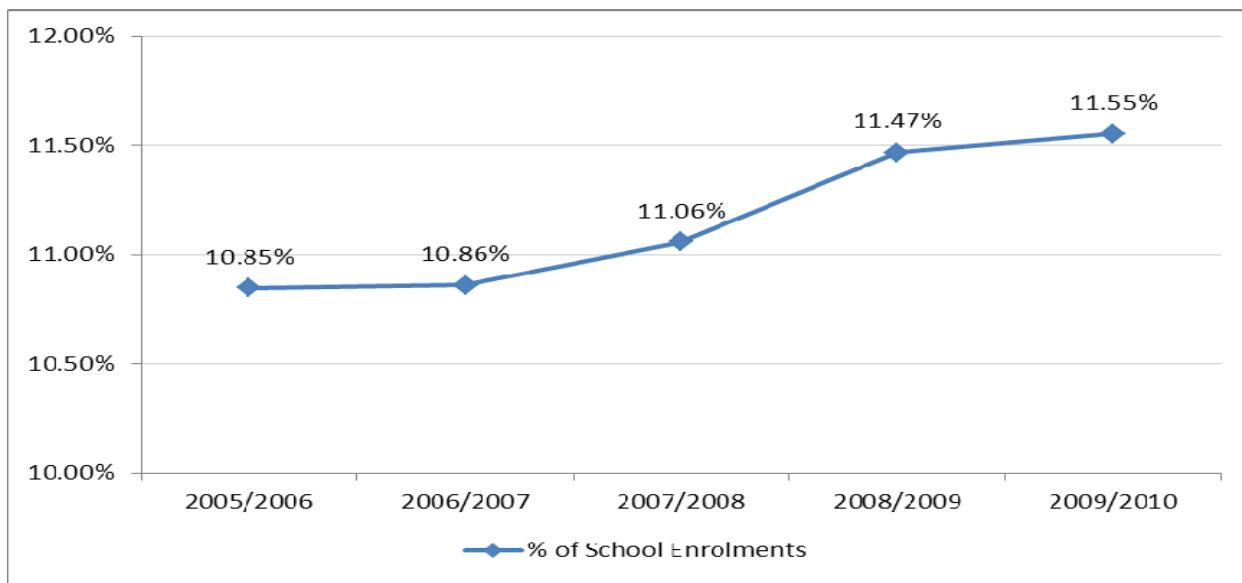
Statistics Canada also reports⁸ an increase from 2005-06 to 2009-10 in the number of

students with identified exceptionalities⁹ as a percentage of total school enrolment from 10.85% to 11.55% [Chart 2].

Most provinces and territories also reported increases over the same period. The greatest increase was identified in Prince Edward Island. Students with identified exceptionalities made up 22.88% of the school population in 2005-06, rising to 30.88% in 2009-10. In Saskatchewan students with IE made up 28.2% of school enrolment in 2009-10 (up from 24.5% in 2005-06), and in Quebec the percentage of students with IE increased to nearly 14% from 12.56%. Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Alberta were the only jurisdictions reporting no increase or small decreases over the specified time period. The largest decrease was found in Alberta reporting that 12.28% of the school population had identified exceptionalities in 2005-06 and 11.51% had identified exceptionalities in 2009-10.

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Chart 2: Enrolments in Special Needs Education (headcount) as a Percentage of Total Enrolments (headcount), Canada 2005–2010



Key to these findings is the fact that, despite the decline in school enrolments in most jurisdictions between 2005-06 and 2009-10, the number of students with identified exceptionalities as a percentage of school enrolment is generally increasing across the country [Chart 3]. Further, these statistics tell us that, on average, approximately one in every 10 students in a school will have an identified exceptionality.

The number of students with identified exceptionalities was also examined in a recent teacher survey of class size and student diversity conducted by the Canadian Teachers' Federation. In this survey, data was gathered from nearly 3,800 teachers reporting on 9,894 classrooms across the country. Our results showed a slightly different picture than that shown by Statistics Canada. Teachers responding to the CTF survey reported that about 16% of the students have identified exceptionalities (IE). When considering the average number, and the Statistics Canada data, this would mean that in a "typical" classroom of 25 students

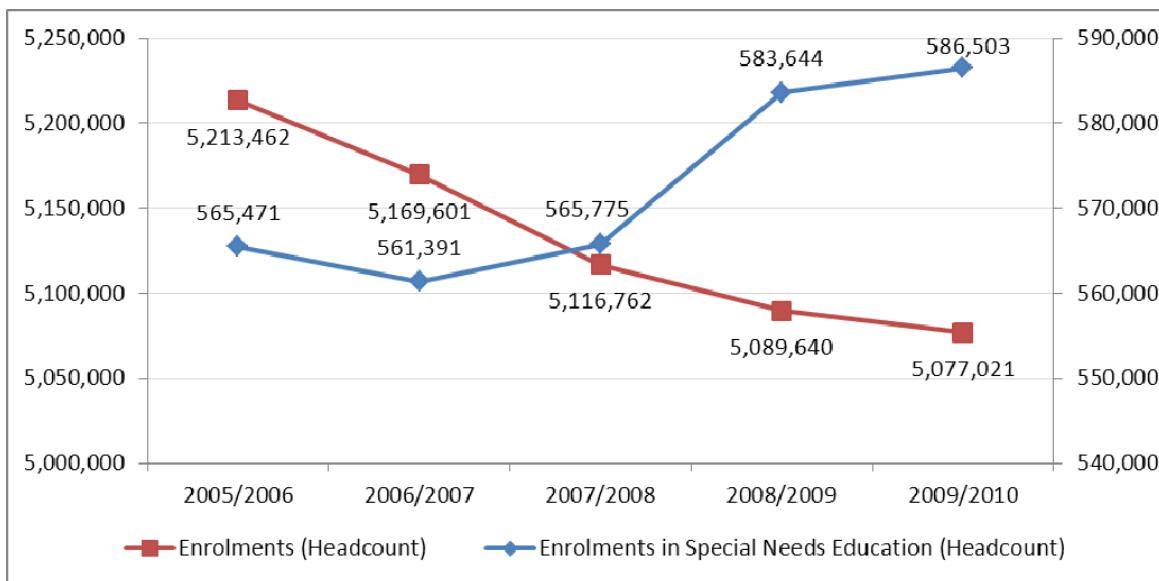
one might expect to find between 2 and 4 students with IE.

Unfortunately, averages do not always tell the full story. Chart 4 depicts the percentage distribution of identified students per classroom. The survey found that 81% of classes reported had at least one student with a formally identified exceptionality and over 13% of the classrooms reported contained 7 or more students with identified exceptionalities (IE).

Chart 4 also contains a number of other interesting findings:

- Nearly 28% of all classrooms reported contained 5 or more students with IE, and 38% had 4 or more students with IE.
- 18.6% of classrooms in grades 1-3 had 5 or more students with IE, and over 29% had 4 or more students with IE.
- 15% of classrooms in grades 4-8 had 7 or more students with IE, with nearly 45% of classrooms in grades 4-8 having 4 or more students with IE.

Chart 3: Enrolments in Special Needs Education (headcount, right axis) and Total Enrolments (headcount, left axis), Canada 2005–2010



- Nearly 16% of secondary classrooms (grades 9 and up) had 7 or more students with IE; 29% of classrooms in grades 9 or higher reported 5 or more students with EI.
- Even at the JK-K level, over 18% of classes reported contained 4 or more students with IE, with 28.5% of classrooms containing 3 or more students with IE.

Additionally, when the number of identified students in a class was compared to the size of the class, almost one-third (31.7%) of all classes reported in the survey had at least 20% of their students with IE. In 9.1% of the classes reported on in the study, at least 40% of the students in the class had an identified exceptionality [Chart 5].

As noted in a previous article analysing the CTF survey findings, this data does not include those students who may have exceptionalities but have

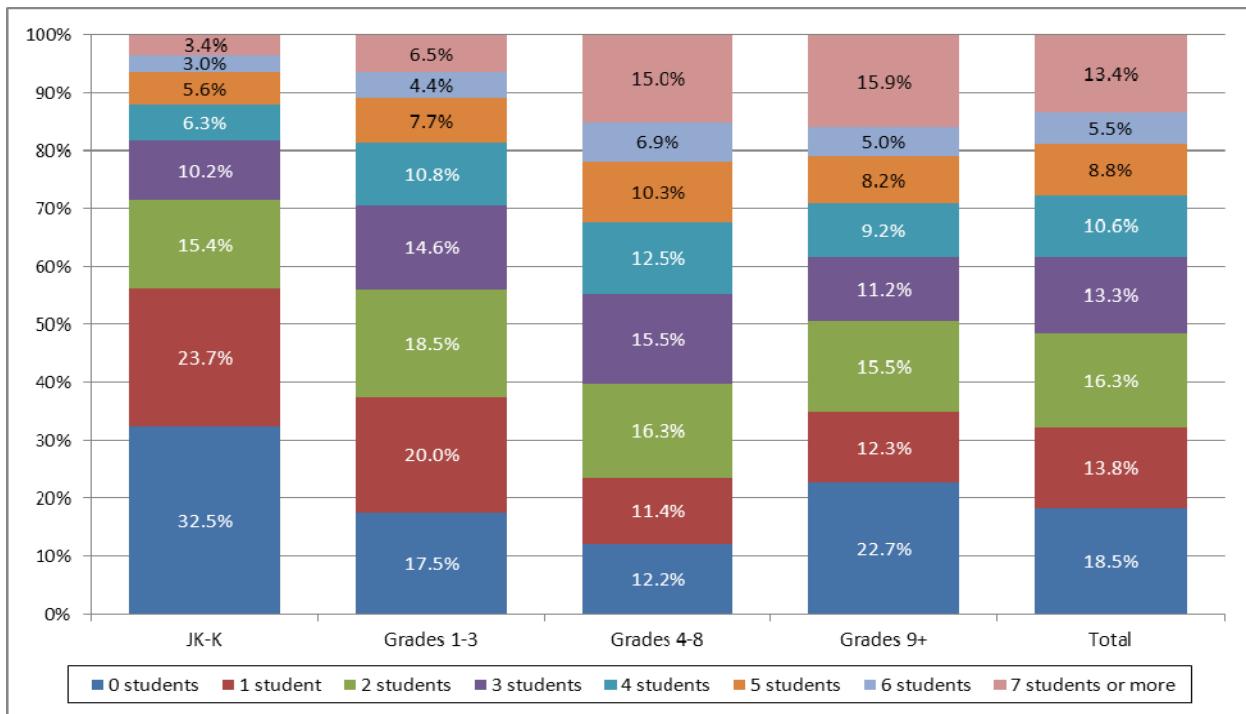
yet to be identified, nor does it include students with other important educational needs.¹⁰

The survey findings clearly demonstrate that the relationship between class size and diversity is a major issue in our schools. When we talk about class size, we also need to be thinking about the number of students

with a variety of individual learning needs in those classes. In order to enhance quality and equity in our public schools, these two issues need to be addressed together.

While teachers generally support the principle of inclusive education they have concerns about its implementation in practice. One of the findings from CTF's

Chart 4: Percentage Distribution by Number of Included Students with Identified Exceptionalities, by Grade Level



national survey of teachers on the theme of the “Teacher Voice on Teaching and Learning” conducted in 2011 was that only a minority of teachers felt “very” satisfied with their ability to meet the needs of students with special educational needs.¹¹

Building the necessary optimal conditions of practice for teachers in order to meet the diverse learning needs of their students is a priority. So what are some of the specific conditions of practice necessary for teachers to properly support inclusive schools and classrooms?

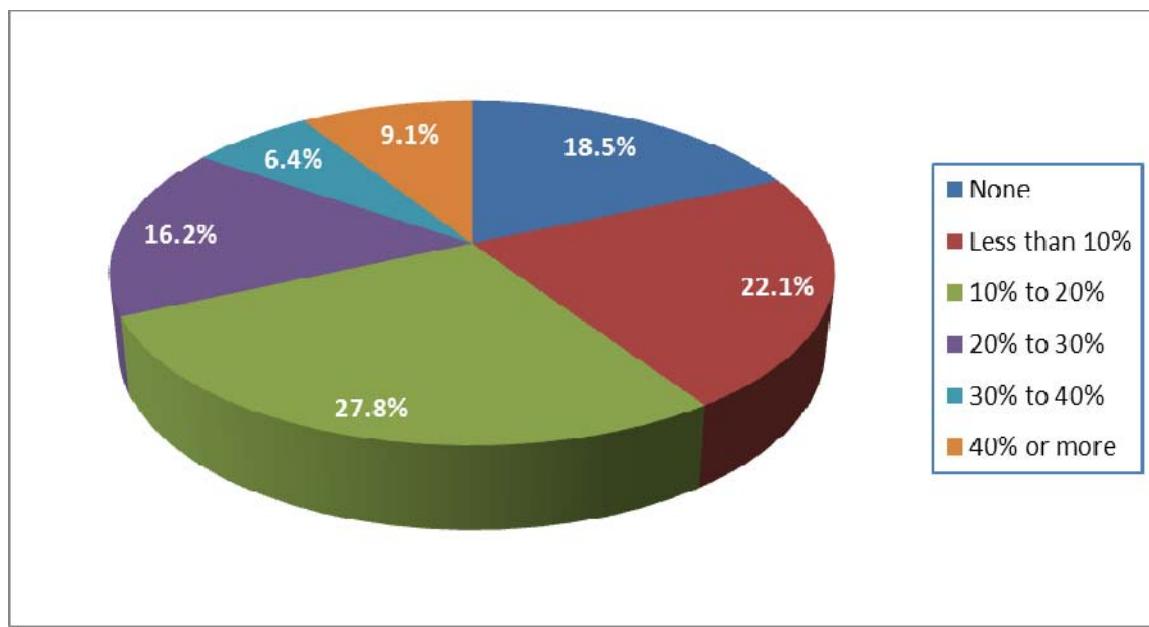
In this regard these lessons from the Canadian Council on Learning’s review of the literature on the academic outcomes of students with special educational needs (SEN) are informative.¹² These lessons focus on three areas: professional development, proper implementation of inclusion, and class size:

- Building capacity in teachers to educate students with SEN is likely the most

important step toward ensuring their academic success. While most teachers support the philosophy of inclusion, they often feel unprepared to instruct students with special needs in their regular classroom. Systematic and frequent professional development opportunities may be the best way to ensure teachers are ready to work in inclusive environments, beginning at the pre-service level.

- Thoughtful implementation of inclusion is critically important to its success. The studies of initiatives where students with SEN in inclusive settings were successful were characterized by adequate support above and beyond that available to general education students. Often this involved team teaching and/or extensive collaboration with a qualified special education teacher.
- Teachers are more likely able to provide effective and individualized instruction when they have a manageable number of special needs students in their classrooms. For similar reasons, reasonable class size may

Chart 5: Percentage Distribution of Reported Classes, by Percentage of Students per Class with Identified Exceptionalities



also be a crucial factor in making an inclusive approach successful. Teachers will have more time to serve students with SEN individually in smaller classes. In addition, boards and schools may do well to ensure a range of services are available to support students with differing needs.

Class size and composition is one of five key elements necessary for successful inclusion identified in a position paper by the Nova Scotia Teachers Union.¹³ The paper states that,

Class size and composition affect the amount of attention an educator can provide to all students in the classroom, in particular, to students with special needs. The larger the total number of students in a classroom coupled with the number and nature of the special needs of students dramatically influences the time an educator can devote to each individual.

The other key elements are funding (for barrier-free buildings; specialized equipment; medical and other

health services; assistive technology; trained support personnel; teacher-

student ratio stipulations; and designated preparation time for planning, implementation and assessment of programs), professional development (in various areas including program planning and implementation; curriculum modification and adaptations; team building; working with support personnel; information on special needs; and teaching skills), resources, and time.

These factors are generally consistent with what teachers surveyed in Alberta said about the

necessary conditions for learning to occur effectively in highly diverse classrooms.¹⁴

- Class sizes should be small and inversely related to the number of students with special needs.
- Teachers and students must have uninterrupted time for instruction.
- School boards should have the latitude to exclude from regular classes students who are highly disruptive and/or who pose a physical risk to other students.

Teachers also said they need:

- adequate time to prepare and to collaborate with other teachers.
- access to professional development, workshops and courses to help them acquire the knowledge and skills to work with students with disabilities.
- access to site-based special education/resource teachers.
- access to the services of well-trained education/teaching assistants.
- access to material resources that would help them to tailor their instructional strategies to the needs of their students.
- access to assistive technology to help students learn more quickly.
- access to an electronic template to help them prepare IPPs [individualized program plans].
- coordinated support from principals, school board personnel, Alberta Education and other agencies that provide services to students.

Funding is a priority for teachers in New Brunswick, according to a survey of New Brunswick Teachers' Federation members conducted in September 2011. Among the findings was that the vast majority of those surveyed believe additional funding to support inclusion is required. In terms of government funding priorities regarding education, concern about heavy teacher workloads topped the list followed by specialized services for students with special needs. When asked to propose one recommendation to improve the quality of education for New Brunswick students, the most frequent response was more educational assistants, support staff, and special needs and inclusion funding.¹⁵

The teaching profession has always been quick to adapt to serve the diverse needs of students. As budgets become tighter and the number of varied classroom needs increases, teachers' work becomes more difficult. The OECD has identified Canada as a top performer in equalizing the educational opportunities for a diverse range of students. In order to maintain this high standard, the necessary conditions of professional practice must be put in place and sufficient resources must be allocated to fully enable teachers to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse group of learners.

Endnotes

¹Porter, G. L. (2010). "Making Canadian schools inclusive: A call to action." *Education Canada*, 48(2). Retrieved from the internet January 6, 2012. www.cea-ace.ca.

²"Special Education knowledge key for all teachers." *Professionally Speaking*. December 2011. Retrieved from the Internet January 6, 2012. http://professionallyspeaking.oct.ca/december_2011/go/additional_qualifications.aspx.

³Hulgin, K. M., & Drake, B. M. (May 2011). "Inclusive education and the No Child Left Behind Act: Resisting entrenchment." *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. 15(4), pp. 389-404.

⁴Canadian Teachers' Federation. (2011). *The Voice of Canadian Teachers on Teaching and Learning*. Ottawa.

⁵People for Education. *The Measure of Success: What Really Counts. Annual Report on Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools 2011*. Toronto.

⁶Ibid., p. 22.

⁷Statistics Canada. (2011). Elementary-Secondary Education Survey (ESES).

⁸Ibid.

⁹Statistics Canada defines students with special educational needs as "those for whom additional public and/or private resources are provided to support their education. Additional resources are resources made available over and above those generally available to regular students. They are resources provided to support students who have difficulties following the regular curriculum. They can be personnel resources (a more favourable teacher/student ratio, additional teachers, assistants or other personnel), material resources (aids or supports of various types, modification or adaptation to classroom, specialised teaching materials), or financial resources (modified funding formulae, money set aside within the regular budget allocation or additional payments)."

¹⁰Froese-Germain, B., Riel, R., & McGahey, B. (Feb. 2012). "Class size and student diversity: Two sides of the same coin." *Perspectives* (Canadian Teachers' Federation).

¹¹Canadian Teachers' Federation. (2011). *The Voice of Canadian Teachers on Teaching and Learning*. Ottawa.

¹²Excerpt from, Canadian Council on Learning. (Summer 2009). "Does placement matter: Comparing the academic performance of students with special needs in inclusive and separate settings." *PD Perspectives*, 8(3), p. 30.

¹³Nova Scotia Teachers Union. (April 2009). *NSTU Position Paper – Inclusion*.

¹⁴Canadian Teachers' Federation. (2011). *The Voice of Canadian Teachers on Teaching and Learning*. Ottawa.

¹⁵2011 NBTF Teachers Study. Corporate Research Associates (powerpoint).

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